



School Lunches

You're sitting in class and your stomach is starting to rumble. Finally, the bell rings and it's time for lunch — woo-hoo! After all that time in class, you deserve a chance to head to the cafeteria and sit down, relax, and enjoy the company of your friends over a lunchtime meal. But wait a minute — what exactly are you eating?

More than at other meals, kids have a lot of control over what they eat for lunch at school. A kid can choose to eat the green beans or throw them out. A kid also can choose to eat an apple instead of an ice cream sandwich.

When choosing what to eat for lunch, making a healthy choice is really important. Here's why: Eating a variety of healthy foods gives you energy to do stuff, helps you grow the way you should, and can even keep you from getting sick.

Think of your school lunch as the fuel you put in your tank. If you choose the wrong kind of fuel, you might run out of energy before the day is over. So what is the right kind of fuel? What does a healthy lunch look like? Unlike that killer question on your math test, there are **many** right answers to these questions.

To Buy or Not to Buy

Most kids have the choice of packing lunch or buying one at school. The good news is that a kid can get a healthy lunch by doing either one. But it's not a slam-dunk. Chances are, some meals and foods served in the school cafeteria are healthier than others.

The typical school lunch is still higher in fat than it should be, according to a recent study. That doesn't mean you shouldn't buy your lunch, it just means you might want to give the cafeteria menu a closer look. Read the cafeteria menu the night before. Knowing what's for lunch beforehand will let you know if you want to eat it! Bring home a copy of the menu or figure out how to find it on the school website.

A packed lunch isn't automatically healthier than one you buy at school. If you pack chocolate cake and potato chips, that's not a nutritious meal! But a packed lunch, if you do it right, does have a clear advantage. When you pack your lunch, you can be sure it includes **your** favorite healthy foods — stuff you know you like. It's not a one-size-fits-all lunch. It's a lunch just for you. If your favorite sandwich is peanut butter and banana, just make it and pack it — then you can eat it for lunch. Or maybe you love olives. Go ahead and pack them!

If you want to pack your lunch, you'll need some help from your parents. Talk to them about what you like to eat in your lunch so they can stock up on those foods. A parent may offer to pack your lunch for you. This is nice of them, but you may want to watch how they do it and ask if you can start making your lunches yourself. It's a way to show that you're growing up.

10 Steps to a Great Lunch

Whether you pack or buy your lunch, follow these guidelines:

1. **Choose fruits and vegetables.** Fruits and vegetables are like hitting the jackpot when it comes to nutrition. They make your plate more colorful and they're packed with vitamins and fiber. It's a good idea to eat at least five servings of fruits and vegetables every day, so try to fit in one or two at lunch. A serving isn't a lot. A serving of carrots is $\frac{1}{2}$ cup or about 6 baby carrots. A fruit serving could be one medium orange.
2. **Know the facts about fat.** Kids need some fat in their diets to stay healthy — it also helps keep you feeling full — but you don't want to eat too much of it. Fat is found in butter, oils, cheese, nuts, and meats. Some higher-fat lunch foods include french fries, hot dogs, cheeseburgers, macaroni and cheese, and chicken nuggets. Don't worry if you like these foods! No food is bad, but you may want to eat them less often and in smaller portions. Foods that are lower in fat are usually baked or grilled. Some of the best low-fat foods are fruits, vegetables, and skim and low-fat milk.
3. **Let whole grains reign.** "Grains" include breads, cereals, rice, and pasta. But as we learn more about good nutrition, it's clear that whole grains are better than refined grains. What's the difference? Brown rice is a whole grain, but white rice is not. Likewise, wheat bread contains whole grains, whereas 100% white bread does not.
4. **Slurp sensibly.** It's not just about what you eat — drinks count, too! Milk has been a favorite lunchtime drink for a long time. If you don't like milk, choose water. Avoid juice drinks and sodas.
5. **Balance your lunch.** When people talk about balanced meals, they mean meals that include a mix of food groups: some grains, some fruits, some vegetables, some meat or protein foods, and some dairy foods such as milk and cheese. Try to do this with your lunch. If you don't have a variety of foods on your plate, it's probably not balanced. A double order of french fries, for example, would not make for a balanced lunch.
6. **Steer clear of packaged snacks.** Many schools make salty snacks, candy, and soda available in the cafeteria or in vending machines. It's OK to have these foods once in a while, but they shouldn't be on your lunch menu.
7. **Mix it up.** Do you eat the same lunch every day? If that lunch is a hot dog, it's time to change your routine. Keep your taste buds from getting bored and try something new. Eating lots of different kinds of food gives your body a variety of nutrients.
8. **Quit the clean plate club.** Because lunch can be a busy time, you might not stop to think whether you're getting full. Try to listen to what your body is telling you. If you feel full, it's OK to stop eating.
9. **Use your manners.** Cafeterias sometimes look like feeding time at the zoo. Don't be an animal! Follow those simple rules your parents are always reminding you about: Chew with your mouth closed. Don't talk and eat at the same time. Use your utensils. Put your napkin on your lap. Be polite. And don't make fun of what someone else is eating.
10. **Don't drink milk and laugh at the same time!** Whatever you do at lunch, don't tell your friends a funny joke when they're drinking milk. Before you know it, they'll be laughing and that milk will be coming out their noses! Gross!

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